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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE
Speech From The Throne
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2003

NOVA SCOTIA

Her Honour

The Honourable Myra A. Freeman, O.N.S., B.A., B.Ed
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF NOVA SCOTIA

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NOVA SCOTIA

First Session of the Fifty-Ninth General Assembly

Our Common Commitment

Government knows that every member of the legislature shares the common commitment to make Nova Scotia an even better place to live, work, and raise a family. We also know that every member of the legislature agrees that we must live within our means, yet find the means to improve the quality of health care we provide Nova Scotians, the quality of education we provide our children, and the level of economic prosperity we all know is within reach.

Ensuring Our Progress

The first Speech from the Throne since government has been honoured with its second mandate highlights many of the actions it will take to ensure Nova Scotia's economic and social progress, including

- a commitment to take the necessary steps and to make the necessary investments to provide better health care for you and your family
- a commitment to make the necessary adjustments to ensure your province stays in balance
- a commitment to make our promised investments in better roads, safer bridges, and healthier schools
- a commitment to advance our plans to reduce class sizes, to kick-start a voluntary pre-school program for four year olds, and to increase opportunities for young Nova Scotians to go to community college and to find a good job here at home
- a commitment to lower personal income taxes so Nova Scotia's economy continues to grow and government has the revenues needed to pay for vital public services over the long term

Supporting Better Health Care

Knowing that health care is the number one concern of Nova Scotians, government is making adjustments in other spending areas to provide our hospitals with funding over and above the significant increases designated through multi-year funding. The additional investments we are making to front-line health care will enable us to act on our plan to provide you and your family with better health care. A plan that includes

- new investments in state-of-the-art medical equipment
- training and recruiting more nurses and doctors and vital health care professionals
- implementing a province-wide stroke strategy
- collecting and broadly sharing information on wait times so doctors and their patients know where they can get faster diagnosis and treatment
- taking additional steps to promote healthy living

Protecting Your Interests

The ambitious legislative agenda that government will pursue this fall and next spring also addresses the following important issues of concern to Nova Scotians.

Specifically, government will

- legislate a 20 percent reduction in automobile insurance premiums
- provide Nova Scotians with the ultimate and final say on Sunday shopping
- establish a cap on annual property assessment increases
- take the necessary steps to better protect Nova Scotia's public health and safety

Advancing Social Progress

Government will take the following steps to ensure we advance the social progress of Nova Scotians.

We will

- introduce legislation to provide greater protection for many of Nova Scotia's well-meaning, community-based volunteers
- take additional steps to support the independence of Nova Scotians with disabilities
- eliminate mandatory retirement within the civil service
- advance plans to protect more of Nova Scotia's valuable wilderness areas
- develop a new strategy to support Nova Scotia's smaller communities
- seek recommendations to ensure Nova Scotia's voters' list is more accurate and complete

Summary

In the final analysis, government will take the steps it knows are needed to provide better, faster health care, to improve the quality of our children's education, to create new jobs, and to support a growing economy.

NOVA SCOTIA

www.gov.ns.ca/legislature/HOUSE_BUSINESS/throne.html

Speech From The Throne

Thursday, September 25, 2003

Her Honour

The Honourable Myra A. Freeman, O.N.S., B.A., B.Ed
Lieutenant Governor

Speech From The Throne

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2003

NOVA SCOTIA

Her Honour

The Honourable Myra A. Freeman, O.N.S., B.A., B.Ed

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF NOVA SCOTIA

For the First Session of the Fifty-Ninth General Assembly
Nova Scotia House of Assembly

Introduction

NOVA SCOTIA

Mr. Speaker, Members of the Legislative Assembly, ladies and gentlemen:

Welcome to the first session of the Fifty-Ninth General Assembly of this historic House.

It has been almost six months to the day since my government put forward its last Speech from the Throne. A time marked by the sad anniversaries of the Swiss Air Tragedy and the horrific events of September 11, as well as the passing of Nova Scotians of great humanity, strength, and kindness.

In a very short span of time, Nova Scotians said goodbye to both Margaret Savage and our former Premier Dr. John Savage. Their contribution to their province, their community, and numerous charities brought literally thousands of Nova Scotians to this House. Nova Scotians who were moved not just by their generosity in life, but by the strength they showed, knowing they faced death.

Nova Scotians remembered

Both will long be remembered for their courage, their character, and their commitment to their family and their province, for doing so much to support those in need both at home and abroad.

And on the same day this year, Nova Scotia lost two former members of this House. William (Bill) Campbell and Thomas Robert MacQueen will be remembered for their service to their province and their valuable contribution to public life.

Johnny Miles served his province in another way, bringing great pride to Nova Scotians as the two-time champion of the Boston Marathon.

Well over a half a century after his remarkable victories, Johnny Miles remains an inspiration to young athletes across our province.

Nova Scotians celebrated

Since this House last met, Nova Scotia also celebrated the accomplishments of Dr. Arnold Burden, Alex Colville, Shirley Elliott, Buddy MacMaster, and Sister Dorothy Moore. My government thanks these distinguished Nova Scotians for their contribution to our province and congratulates them on being chosen as the latest recipients of the Order of Nova Scotia.

And just last month, Nova Scotia welcomed home the men and women who proudly served a six month tour of duty as part of Operation Apollo.

My government joins all Nova Scotians in thanking the crew of HMCS Fredericton, and all our military service men and women, for the personal sacrifices they make in serving their country abroad.

And, of course, we are all extremely proud of Gary Beals.

Gary's giant talent and down-to-earth nature won the hearts of Nova Scotians and millions of Canadians from coast to coast.

My government joins his family, the very proud community of Cherry Brook, and his many friends and fans in wishing him all the best as he embarks on what is sure to be an amazing career.

We also salute the incredible talent of New Waterford's Richie Wilcox who was among the top 11 finalists.

These two young men, along with Nova Scotia's other top 100 Canadian Idol finalists, Kevin Murdock, David Anderson, Mark Marsman, and Ryan Somers, show that while we may be a small province, we're home to some very big talent.

As we begin the first session of our second mandate, my government also congratulates the men and women who have once again been honoured with the confidence of their fellow Nova Scotians.

As well, we extend our sincere best wishes to the men and women who proudly served their province in this Legislature and who will now go on to serve Nova Scotia in new ways.

To all of the members who are taking their place in this House for the first time, you have been given a special honour to serve your province and to help your communities grow and thrive. It is an honour that relatively few have the privilege of knowing. With it comes the tremendous responsibility to put the interests of the people of Nova Scotia before all else.

The interests of Nova Scotians come first

My government is confident that you will accept and live up to that responsibility and that our province will be all the better for it.

Another proud first

My government is also pleased to welcome to this House Nova Scotia's first Minister Responsible for African-Nova Scotian Affairs. Another proud first, not just for our province, but for our country.

Our Common Commitment

Governing is always challenging. It is even more of a challenge when no one party has a clear majority.

And while many of us have come here with different views, we all share the common commitment to make Nova Scotia an even better place to live, work, and raise a family—a goal that requires a more vigorous spirit of cooperation.

My government knows that in order for minority government to work, compromise must come before confrontation, principled action before political reaction.

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We further understand that while every member of this House shares the responsibility for making this assembly work, government must lead by example.

And we will.

We are committed to ensuring that where there is agreement, there will be progress. Where there are differences, there will be consultation, cooperation, and reasoned compromise.

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And while our political differences may be many, there are a number of important areas where we are in full agreement.

We all want minority government to work.

We all want to see Nova Scotia continue to grow and prosper.

We all want to do more to improve the quality of health and education, and to support those in need.

Moreover, we all know that in order for that to happen, we need to ensure that the hard-won gains Nova Scotia achieved by overcoming 40 years of deficit spending are not put in peril.

We cannot risk either the tangible benefits we now see as a result of Nova Scotia's improved credit ratings or the less tangible, but equally real, benefits we know come from a new sense of optimism and confidence.

Minority government must be about compromise.

Staying in balance

It cannot be about conceding ground on an issue of such vital importance to the future of Nova Scotia as balancing the budget—an issue we all agree on.

Because, if we fail in this, if we fail where there is agreement, we will surely fail where there is not.

More importantly, we will fail the people of Nova Scotia in our common promise to them to put the greater long-term good before our own short-term partisan interests.

Meeting the Challenge

Recently my government provided Nova Scotians with an update on the state of the province's finances. With revenues down and the cost of ensuring Nova Scotians have access to better health care up, the numbers reflect the need for all members of this House to show reason and patience when it comes to placing new spending demands on the taxpayer.

In short, the numbers present government with a bigger than expected challenge in meeting our fiscal target—a challenge my government will meet.

Just as we have over the past four years, we will continue to make the necessary investments to protect the health and well-being of Nova Scotians. And just as we have over the past four years, we will continue to make the necessary adjustments to protect the fiscal health of our province. Moreover, we will welcome and act on every reasonable suggestion that helps us achieve these, as well as other important goals that advance the interests of Nova Scotians.

A competitive environment is key to our success

One of the most important being the need to ensure Nova Scotia has a competitive tax environment—an environment that attracts investment, spurs consumer confidence, creates new jobs, and generates the revenues needed to pay for vital public services over the long-term.

In June my government made the first down payment on our commitment to improve Nova Scotia's competitive position, providing well over 400,000 Nova Scotians with a refund on their provincial income tax.

Lower taxes are key to improving our competitiveness

On January 1 of next year, Nova Scotians will begin taking home a bigger paycheque as the 10 per cent tax cut comes into full effect.

And while my government fully recognizes there are many demands upon the taxpayer, we also know that Nova Scotia's 40-year history of taxing then spending was a failure.

It failed working Nova Scotians. It failed their children. And it failed our province.

Lower taxes will not.

Moreover, my government believes that at a time when the economy both at home and abroad struggles through the after-effects of SARS, Mad Cow disease, and a sluggish North American economy, there is no better time to provide our economy with a much-needed boost.

And there is no better way to do that, than by giving working families a break.

There is no better way to do that, than by sending a positive signal to the outside world that Nova Scotia has its fiscal house in order and its economic priorities straight.

To that end, my government will also do more to support the men and women who drive our economic progress: the men and women who operate a small business, employ Nova Scotians, buy local goods and services, and help generate the revenues government uses to provide the services we all rely on.

Supporting small business

The second installment of our promised tax relief for small business will therefore come into effect, on time and as promised, as we once again increase the annual limit under which the small business tax rate applies.

We will also do more to ensure that all Nova Scotia businesses, be they small or large, have greater opportunity to bid on government goods and services.

Again, as promised, a new Supplier Development Program will be up and running in short order to ensure that there is greater outreach with Nova Scotia companies competing for government business. An initiative that demonstrates not just my government's commitment to grow our economy, but our firm belief in the talent of our workforce and the quality of our products—a message that we will aggressively share with others.

My government knows that there is a need to continue to pursue new jobs based on sound business principles and solid business case analyses. We will therefore continue to support the successful efforts of Nova Scotia Business Incorporated and the Office of Economic Development, which have helped diversify and strengthen our economy.

Supporting a diverse and strong economy

We also know that job gains in one area mean little if there are job losses in another. To that end, my government will take steps to ensure Nova Scotia's beef and cattle farmers receive more immediate assistance as they deal with the after-effects of Canada's Mad Cow scare.

Faster help for farmers

In the final analysis, my government knows that unless we actively promote and support our own success, and unless we take the necessary steps to grow Nova Scotia's economy, our losses will be measured not just in lay-offs, but in longer waits for health care, less money for our classrooms, and fewer dollars for urgently needed road repairs.

In the end, my government knows that a balanced budget, lower taxes, more support for small business, and greater confidence in our province are all key to our economic growth and social progress.

More Support for Better Health Care

My government also knows that the ever-increasing cost of providing Nova Scotians with access to high-quality health care is eroding our capacity to make important investments in other areas. Our aging population, combined with some of the highest chronic disease rates in the country, continue to add huge pressures to our bottom line.

Health Care — the number one concern

Knowing that health care is the number one concern of Nova Scotians, my government is making adjustments in other spending areas so we can provide our hospitals with funding over and above the significant increases we are providing through multi-year funding.

The challenge we now face is finding additional dollars to invest in a healthier population at a time when demands for hospital and long-term care continue to grow. It is a huge, but not insurmountable, challenge.

A challenge that requires a renewed commitment on the part of everyone working within our health system to maximize the value of every health care dollar.

A challenge that requires a new understanding and commitment on the part of all Nova Scotians to make lifestyle choices that contribute to their own well-being.

A challenge that requires greater support from Ottawa.

Every new dollar meant for health care will be spent on health care

My government welcomed the increased contribution Ottawa made to health care following last year's First Ministers' meeting. We remain concerned, however, that it was a one-time-only contribution. There is no guarantee that future funding will either be forthcoming or of an amount that will even begin to ease the pressures on our already overburdened health care system.

In fact, as we all know, Commissioner Romanow has made clear that even if Ottawa does come through with the full amount of its $2 billion contingency fund, it will fall far short of what is needed.

My government therefore urges all members of this House to speak with a united voice in our efforts to have the federal government accept a greater share of its responsibility for providing Nova Scotians, and all Canadians, with access to quality health care.

In return, my government offers this commitment: just as we have in the past, every new dollar meant for health care will be spent on health care. And every new dollar spent on health care will be used to improve access to care and to reduce wait times for diagnosis and treatment.

Faster diagnosis and better treatment

The investments we have made, and will continue to make, through the federally-funded Medical Equipment Fund are one example of our commitment to ensure the dollars we receive are spent for the purposes for which they were intended. A new linear accelerator, new state-of-the-art ultrasounds, and digital X-rays will soon mean cancer patients, expectant moms, and potential heart attack or stroke victims, along with hundreds of other Nova Scotians from one end of the province to the other, receive faster diagnosis and better treatment.

Protecting public safety

My government also knows that beyond the immediate fiscal challenge of providing better health care to Nova Scotians is the challenge brought about by new, potentially-deadly, and highly contagious diseases.

We recognize that in the face of new diseases such as SARS, the legislation now in place to protect the health of Nova Scotians is no longer adequate. A new Health Protection Act will be introduced to strengthen Nova Scotia's capacity to respond to the widespread threat new and unforseen diseases pose to Nova Scotia's public health and safety.

As well, my government will introduce legislation to provide greater support and comfort to Nova Scotians caring for a family member in the last stages of life. Our legislation will ensure that immediately upon Ottawa proclaiming amendments to the Employment Insurance Act, Nova Scotians will be able to take time off work with benefits, but without the added stress or worry of whether their job is secure.

Protecting Your Interests

The legislative agenda my government will pursue will also address other issues of concern to Nova Scotians, one of the most pressing being the need to ensure Nova Scotians have access to fair and affordable automobile insurance.

My government has already taken a number of important steps in this regard, including implementing an eight-month freeze on new auto insurance rates and putting a stop to discriminatory insurance practices based on age, gender, and non-driving related claims.

We also broadly consulted both insurance consumers and providers on the best way to achieve our promise of a 20 per cent reduction in insurance rates.

My government believes that Nova Scotians cannot wait a year, or more, for a break on the high cost of car insurance.

Car insurance relief, sooner rather than later

With the support of this House, we will therefore provide relief to drivers, sooner rather than later, by introducing legislation that provides for a 20 per cent reduction in premiums effective November 1 of this year.

My government will also continue to work with our Atlantic partners to harmonize insurance laws across the region and to carefully investigate the best way to ensure fair and affordable insurance is available to Nova Scotians in future.

As well, in response to the rising cost of liability insurance, amendments will be introduced to further protect many of Nova Scotia's dedicated and well-meaning volunteers from frivolous and unwarranted legal claims.

My government also recognizes that large increases in property assessments driven by huge jumps in the market value of Nova Scotia land, particularly coastal land, are causing hardship for many Nova Scotia families, including many seniors on fixed incomes.

Cap on property assessment increases

As promised, following consultation with the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, my government will introduce legislation to establish a cap on annual assessment increases in cases where there has been little or no physical change to the property. Amendments to the Assessment Act will help many families struggling to keep up with the cost of maintaining their home. It will also help ensure that many Nova Scotian families continue to enjoy land that has been in their family for generations.

We will also take steps to ensure that the integrity of Nova Scotia's electoral system is protected. Nova Scotia's Electoral Reform Commission will be asked to make recommendations that will provide for a more accurate and complete list of eligible voters.

The legislation my government will bring forward will protect the interests of voters, drivers, home and property owners, consumers, community-based organizations, volunteers, as well as the health and safety of our province.

We will also introduce Sunday shopping legislation that protects the interests of workers and small business owners.

My government knows that many Nova Scotians hold strong and opposing views on this issue.

We also believe that regardless of whether they are for or against Sunday shopping, most Nova Scotians agree that collectively they should have the ultimate and final say on whether or not it is permitted.

And they will.

Binding plebiscite on Sunday shopping

As promised, legislation that provides for Sunday shopping the six weeks prior to Christmas, followed by a binding plebiscite next fall on whether it is allowed year round, limited to the pre-Christmas period, or not supported at all, will be introduced within days.

Eliminate mandatory retirement within the civil service

The legislation will include strong and clear provisions to protect worker rights. It will also ensure the interests of small business owners bound by retail lease agreements are protected.

My government will also introduce legislation that acknowledges that a person's contribution to public service does not automatically disappear at the age of 65. Mandatory retirement will therefore be eliminated within the provincial civil service.

The Next Steps

My government sought a second mandate from the people of Nova Scotia based on an ambitious but realistic four-year plan. A plan that acknowledged the need for action on many fronts.

The current session of the legislature will demonstrate my government's commitment to put our plan into action.

Reducing wait lists

In addition to pursuing a busy legislative agenda, we will continue our efforts to provide Nova Scotians with better health care by moving forward with the next steps in our multi-year plan *Your Health Matters*, including collecting and broadly sharing information that can be used to reduce wait times for diagnosis and treatment, and training and recruiting more nurses, doctors, and other vital health professionals.

We will also move forward with our plans to increase our investment in healthy living, to introduce a Low Income Assistance Program for Diabetics, and to implement a comprehensive stroke strategy.

Addressing needs, reducing demands

Initiatives that first and foremost address real needs and, last but not least, hold the potential to reduce demands on our health care system.

In addition, and as promised, my government will continue to support the independence of Nova Scotians with disabilities by eliminating Registry of Motor Vehicle fees on Community-based Accessible Transportation and by establishing a Wheelchair Recycling Demonstration project for young Nova Scotians.

Getting our children off to a better start

My government will also continue our efforts to help our children get off to the best possible start. To that end, we will begin the consultations needed to kick-start *Ready to Learn*. This voluntary, free pre-school program for children will be introduced in areas where access to structured day care is limited and access to school space is available—an initiative that will better prepare our youngest children for a learning environment that my government is determined to see does more to support the success of all our students.

We will therefore move forward with our plan to reduce class sizes in the early years, provide more supports for special needs students, and put more books in the classroom. We will also ensure greater accountability for results by providing parents with more and better information, and by continuing our efforts to implement a province-wide school accreditation program.

Better roads and safer bridges

My government is also committed to seeing that every region of Nova Scotia benefits from a growing economy. That is why we will make our promised investments in better roads and safer bridges, take additional steps to eliminate needless regulations and reduce red tape, implement the next steps in our economic growth and energy plans, and provide more young Nova Scotians with the opportunity to go to community college, to get a marketable trade, and to find a good job right here at home.

Sustaining and supporting smaller communities

As well, in recognition of the increased pressures on many smaller communities resulting from urbanization, we will develop and implement a long-term strategy to help sustain and support struggling communities—a strategy that will be guided by input from Nova Scotians who, like my government, know that Nova Scotia's smaller communities not only contribute much to our quality of life, but help define the rich character of our province.

The urban trend has also brought new pressures to our cities, particularly our capital city. My government remains committed to working with the Halifax Regional Municipality to identify and jointly support a strategy to resolve the traffic problems arising from its fast-growing population.

Protecting Nova Scotia's valued environment

My government also knows that urbanization, along with the need to create new jobs and generate new wealth, has put added pressure on our environment. We further know that Nova Scotia's economic progress cannot come at any price and that we have a responsibility to future generations to protect more of Nova Scotia's most valuable lands, such as Eigg Mountain and Gully Lake. My government will proceed with the process of designating these two sites as new candidate Wilderness Areas. As well, we will continue to work in partnership with organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada to protect more of Nova Scotia's coastal lands and wilderness areas from development.

Conclusion

Staying in balance, staying competitive, and staying on course

What my government has outlined today are some of the highlights, not the sum total, of the actions we will take to stay in balance, stay competitive, and stay on course in our efforts to bring greater prosperity to our province.

And while we recognize that this legislature has changed a lot over the past few months, the priorities of Nova Scotians have not.

And neither has my government's commitment to see that they are addressed in a fiscally responsible, fair, and reasonable manner.

Living within our means while finding the means...

We will continue to live within our means, yet find the means to improve the quality of health care we provide Nova Scotians, the quality of education we provide our children, and the level of prosperity we know is within reach.

And where we have the confidence and support of the members of this House, and for as long as we have the confidence and support of the members of this House, we will continue to move forward with our four-year plan, knowing it is the right plan for Nova Scotia.

Thank You.